

## A Red River townsite speculation in 1857 /

### A RED RIVER TOWNSITE SPECULATION IN 1857.\*

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From the age of seventeen, in 1849, to my arrival in St. Paul, July 21, 1855, I was a school teacher during winters, and part of the time during summers. My district school pay ran from twelve to sixteen dollars a month and boarding round fare. Naturally, when I got to St. Paul I set about trying to better myself financially, as I owed fifty dollars and had only four cents to pay it with.

A chance was offered me in November, 1856, to become one of a company of five to make townsites along the Red river of the North, with a fifth interest and all expenses paid, if I would help hold the towns by occupation. I thought opportunity had knocked at my door and I said yes, promptly. My journal of this expedition supplies the following narrative.

### THE COMPANY AND THE PLANS AND OUTFIT.

George F. Brott of St. Cloud, E. Demortimer and J. W. Prentiss of St. Paul, and J. C. Moulton and I of St. Anthony, made the company. Brott and Demortimer were the financial backers of the concern, Moulton its travelling superintendent, and Prentiss and I were to be the resident townsite managers. Moulton, Prentiss and I, English Bill, our cook, two guides, and four ox team drivers, were to go on the trip, in total ten men. Two sleds were built for rough usage. One was to be loaded with corn and cob ground feed for our five yoke of oxen. The other sled was to carry provisions for ten men and our garden and farm tools. Six of the ten men were to remain on the Red river during the winter. Our two guides were French and Chippewa half-breeds named Pierre and Charlie Bottineau (pronounced

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Brichineau). The distance we had to travel was about one hundred and twenty-five miles in a westerly direction 412 from St. Cloud, Minnesota, to the junction of the Bois des Sioux and Otter Tail rivers where they head the Red river of the North.

Our expedition began on the last day of the year 1856, in one of the severest winters the oldest inhabitants of the Northwest had yet seen. We started at that time because we had heard that other parties were planning to get out ahead of us, and there was no "get left" in any of our party that I had ever heard of.

It was intended at first to make a canoe trip up the Minnesota river and down the Bois des Sioux in October, 1856; but a freeze up somewhere en route was feared, so that it was decided to wait until we could get ready for a winter trip with ox teams, lumber woods fashion.

My outfit garments were three thick woolen shirts, three pairs of heavy woolen drawers, three pairs of woolen stockings with a pair of Indian moccasins drawn over them, and a pair of thick elk skin overshoes laced high on my ankles. Then came a pair of Canada gray trousers and leggings to button down on the overshoes to keep the snow out when we had to break roads. A short coat of Kentucky jeans, and a lamb skin cap, wool inside and made to come down over my neck, with side flaps to tie with strings over my nose to keep it from freezing, and a pair of fur gauntlets, completed my garment outfit. I was not pretty, but even in forty below zero weather I was comfortable. I had no colds, nor did I freeze any part of my body during all the terrible exposure of that terrible winter of 1857.

When we struck unburned prairie, we had to break our roads through snow a foot to eighteen inches deep and often drifted from four to eight feet deep. These drifts were sometimes ten to fifteen rods wide, and all had to be shoveled through, often with temperature ten to thirty degrees below zero. On the burned prairie the snow was usually blown down to a three to four-inch icy crust, which cut the fetlocks of our cattle unmercifully.

## **BEGINNING THE TRAMP.**

Wednesday, December 31, 1856, Moulton and Prentiss started from St. Paul with the loaded teams. I followed on 413 Friday, January 2, 1857, in a blinding snow storm, picking up on my way Pierre Bottineau and his brother from their home in St. Anthony. I had a span of horses and driver and intended to overtake Moulton and the teams about the time they reached St. Cloud. Before we got out of St. Anthony our sleigh tipped over in a snow drift. We righted without breaking anything and went on to Elk River, where we stopped for the night.

The next morning we started for St. Cloud at daylight. It was very cold. As the ox teams had broken the roads in fair shape, we made good time reaching Boyington's tavern, about fifteen miles from St. Cloud, in time for dinner. There we overtook Moulton. I got out and assumed charge of the teams, and Moulton and Prentiss went on with Bottineau and brother to St. Cloud. I got to Colonel Emerson's stopping place opposite lower St. Cloud at half past six, pretty tired, as I had to walk most of the way over not the best of roads. At Emerson's we put up for the night.

Monday, January 5th, we moved up the Mississippi and crossed at the upper ferry, headed by the guides, and started across the prairie in the direction of St. Joe. The guides went ahead on snow shoes. Prentiss and I followed. Between the four of us we made a road that our teams followed with more or less difficulty, for the snow was about eighteen inches deep and what track there had been was drifted full. We made eight miles to St. Joe by night.

The necks of three of our cattle had begun to gall. We changed the bows and wrapped them with soft cloths. The next day we reached Cold Spring, ten miles farther on. The 7th we go to Richardson's, seven miles from Cold Spring. The 8th, which was Thursday, we made only five miles, as we had to cross snow drifts three to four feet deep with not a sign of a road anywhere. Up to this time roofs had sheltered us and our cattle at night. There

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was only one spare bed in any of the settlers' houses, and usually none at all. Then all of us had to sleep on the floor under a comforter about fifteen feet long, eight feet wide, and three inches thick, quilted with cotton batting and made specially for the trip.

Friday, the 9th of January, we started at daylight, again a very hard day. On the unburned prairie snow drifts were 414 crossed, which the guides on their snow shoes beat down for the teams the best they could. Progress was slow, but we made ten miles and camped under our tent for the first time, with our feet to a rousing hot wood fire. We slept comfortably and soundly.

Saturday, the 10th, we crossed a grassy lake near which we had camped the night before. It was very bad getting on and off the lake. We teamed only about seven miles that day, and camped on the shore of a beautiful lake that Bottineau called Lake Henry.

The 11th was Sunday, and, tired out, we rested. A Dutchman had built a house about half a mile away from our camp. It was about a third of the way to our destination from the Mississippi, and the last house between us and the Pacific coast, so far as we knew.

Just after we had breakfasted, a boy about twelve years old sauntered up opposite our fire to investigate. I was sitting on our bedding next to Pierre Bottineau, our main guide. "See me scare that boy," said he in a low voice. Suddenly grabbing his hunting knife in his right hand and letting out a wild Indian yell that made the woods ring, he went over the top of the log fire after the boy. Didn't that boy run? Well, he did.

Our preparations for camping consisted in finding timber and water. The lakes and ponds were only five to ten miles apart and usually wooded on one side or two sides, so this was not a difficult thing to do. For our bedding we usually found swamp reeds or prairie grass. On this we spread our unlined buffalo skin overcoats and waterproofs. Over us we had our comforter of wool, padded with cotton batting, about three inches thick and firmly quilted. This covered ten men and was about fifteen feet long, as I have stated. We slept with all our clothes on, and there was no chance to change or wash any of them short of the end

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of our journey. We slept spoon fashion, and when one wanted to turn the rest of us had to turn also. Sometimes my hips got pretty cold on the frozen ground when the under-bedding happened to be thin.

Monday. the 12th we found trouble again from the galled shoulders of our cattle. This time we changed the off ox to 415 the near side and wrapped the bows with more soft cloth. On this day we crossed elk tracks. The guides went after them, but unsuccessfully.

From the 12th to the 23rd the days were much alike in travel experiences. There was heavy pulling for the cattle and shoveling across strips of unburned prairie for us, and considerable flinching of our cattle as the icy crusts cut their ankles where fires of the summer and fall had burned the prairie grass. Brilliant sun dogs predicted stormy weather.

### **WOUNDING TWO BUFFALOES, AND SNOWED UNDER.**

On Friday, the 23rd, we crossed the last of a chain of lakes near their head. They were about three miles long. As our teams were crossing we saw two buffaloes feeding on the swamp grass, about two miles away. We stopped the teams and sent them off under Prentiss to a patch of woods bordering the lake, to find a camping place. The guides, followed by Moulton, English Bill (our cook), and myself, started to circle around the meadow where the buffaloes had been feeding. About two miles farther away we found where the animals, evidently frightened, had gone out to the prairie on the jump. The guides took the pony and started on the trail, and the rest of us returned to camp, and none too soon.

A lively blizzard was sweeping down. All hands cut and dragged the dryest wood we could find while the snow drove in great blanket sheets fiercely upon us. Gradually it put out our fire, and wet and exhausted, our tent blown down, we were doubtful what to do. At this juncture the guides returned. "Spread out the bed and get into it as quick as you can," shouted Pierre, and we obeyed. It seemed to me there was an inch of drifted snow on the buffalo skins when we got in and covered up head and ears. How the wind howled through

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the creaking tree tops overhead, and how we shivered in our wet clothing! It was pretty cold for a while, but gradually we steamed up and went to sleep. Through the night the wind drifted from four to six inches of snow upon us. Pierre said that the snow, covering us as it did, probably kept us from freezing to death, as the wind changed in the night and the air became intensely cold.

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Pierre waked me about three in the morning, trying to start up the fire from a few coals that were still alive under the logs of the afternoon fire. He was singing in Chippewa. I pulled the bed clothes down a little and a chunk of snow rolled in, nearly as big as my head. I asked Bottineau to turn his Chippewa jargon into English, and he said it was to give us encouragement. Crawling out of that steaming bed into down below zero air, to try to dry our wet clothes, as we had to do that morning, certainly needed encouragement. The guides had overtaken the two buffaloes and put four shot-gun bullets into them. They evidently were severely wounded, but had to be left because of the rapidly approaching blizzard. Our cattle and pony, partially sheltered from the wind, among the trees and back of broken bluffs, were less exposed than we were and fared comfortably well.

As our guides predicted another storm, we moved our camp to a less exposed place near our cattle, and laid over on Saturday, the 24th. When the sun arose, a brilliant sun dog appeared on each side of it, and a bright crescent swung down above it. It was a beautiful sight but portentous. Hardly had we got settled when the storm burst again with renewed fury. We could not see, even hazily, ten rods before us in any direction. Toward evening the wind slackened, and we dug our bed clothes out of the snow and dried them before the fire the best we could in preparation for a night of doubt. We slept safe and warm, however.

Sunday, the 25th, dawned clear but intensely cold. Usually we did not travel on Sunday, but today, in this time of sudden storms, we felt called to push on. Our cattle also were growing weak, and the ankles of some of them were swelled as large as tea kettles,

having been cut by sharp snow crusts and inflamed by freezing. They stained the snow with gushing blood at nearly every step they took. Besides, we were some thirty-five miles from our destination on the Red river, and there was only one reliable patch of timber on the way. This was at Lightning lake. We were ten miles distant from that lake, and we did not know what deep drifts of snow might obstruct our way. A few small groups of poplar trees, two or three inches 417 in diameter, were strung far apart along the Otter Tail river, but they were miles from the route we were to follow on our way to the Red river. The guides said our safety lay in pushing on as fast and direct as we were able. After we had gone about five miles, Moulton and Charlie Bottineau concluded to go after the wounded buffalo. About that time one of our oxen fell, and it seemed as if we could not get the discouraged animal on his feet again. We still had five miles to go to reach the woods of Lightning lake, and night was near. We finally got through, however, and selected a place for our camp on the south side of the lake under a high bluff. Moulton and Charlie returned without seeing the buffalo.

The wind changed during the night, and on Monday it began to blow again. Pierre, our head guide, vetoed all attempts of our anxious men to make a start across that treeless twenty-five mile prairie to the Bois des Sioux river.

Tuesday, the 27th, started in clear and cold. The Leaf mountains on our right, twenty to thirty miles away, and the Coteau des Prairies ahead and toward the left, about sixty miles distant, loomed white and cold in the bracing morning air. According to Bottineau, Lightning lake took its name from a man in a former expedition being struck by lightning and killed, a few rods back of where we camped.

### **KILLING MY FIRST BUFFALO.**

Shortly after we started, we saw two buffalo off to the left. Pierre and Moulton started after them. Charlie and I went on ahead of our teams. We were soon met by Pierre with the information that one of the animals that he and Charlie had wounded was near. Charlie

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and I started on a trot in the direction Pierre pointed. The snow was more than a foot deep, with a crust on top, through which we broke about every fifth step. In that way we ran over a mile. On reaching his trail we followed it in nearly the direction the teams were pointing.

At the last bench of land before coming to the wide level prairie east of the Bois des Sioux river, we crawled carefully up to the summit of the bench. About forty rods away we saw the buffalo lying in the snow. He saw us as soon as we 27 418 saw him. I said to Charlie, "We must run him down," and we started as fast as we could in the pursuit. The buffalo dragged himself on three legs about twenty rods farther, and then gave up. Charlie reached him first and emptied both barrels of his gun into him without bringing him down. I had a breech-loading Sharp's rifle, with caps on a tape which ran out one at a time as I cocked the gun. Nearly breathless from wallowing through the snow, I reached the buffalo just as Charlie fired his second shot. My first shot went wild, but I had a cartridge in before Charlie could get a ball down one barrel. We tried to get around to his side, but snorting, with his bead-like eyes glowing like coals of fire through the shaggy hair of his forehead, the buffalo swung on his crippled hips and faced me. I told Charlie to attract his attention in front and keep on loading his gun. I stepped around to his left side and put a bullet in his heart, which killed him.

Hearing the sound of our firing, Moulton soon brought the teams around, and we were all highly pleased that we would not have to eat pork for supper. Unhitching our teams, we fed them from our rapidly diminishing store of cattle feed. Then kindling a fire with the dry poplar poles that we had loaded on our sleds at Lightning lake for that purpose, we cooked our first meal of buffalo meat, which, with our starved cattle, was soon to be our only food until new supplies could be sent to us from St. Paul.

### **AN ALL NIGHT DRIVE.**

As there was no sheltered place to camp and Pierre was anxious to get ahead for fear of another snow storm, we decided to keep going through the night. The guides traveled



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by the North star, and when that was clouded over by the below zero fog that swept over us every few minutes, we had to stop and wait for the air to clear. As soon as our cattle stopped, the drivers dropped on the snow and into a sleepy drowse from which we had to arouse them in some cases by a vigorous shake. It was easy to freeze to death in the temperature of that night. Fortunately nearly all the prairie had been burned over, else probably our cattle would not have lasted 419 through. As it was, they staggered as they slowly walked. Constantly in fear of the wind rising on that twenty-five mile prairie in the moonless night of the 27th and sunless day of the 28th until four in the afternoon, while I followed our staggering men and cattle, it was anything but a play spell.

Soon after leaving the place where we killed the buffalo, we found a huge drift where we had to shovel our way nearly thirty rods. It was a slow, hard job, but we finally got the teams through. It delayed us so much that by daylight fully twelve miles of the twenty-five remained to be crossed. During the day and night of the 27th we had traveled only about thirteen miles. About daylight of the 28th our teams refused to go any farther. I had wet my feet running down the buffalo, and though I kicked and threshed the best I could, they were now nearly frozen. We stopped and kindled a fire with our dry poplar poles, and I changed my stockings for dry ones. After feeding our teams and eating a hasty breakfast, we went slowly on again toward a patch of timber about four miles up the Bois des Sioux river. There was only one place on the 28th where we had to shovel the road and that we soon got over. When we reached the Bois des Sioux late in the afternoon, we were about as happy a bunch of men as you often see.

### **A BUFFALO HERD ON THE BRECKENRIDGE TOWNSITE.**

Thursday the 29th we started for the junction of the Bois des Sioux and Otter Tail rivers, where we were to make our first town, called Breckenridge. The guides and Moulton and I went ahead of the teams that were coming down along the right bank of the river under Prentiss. Near the junction of the two rivers to form the Red river of the North we saw fresh buffalo tracks. We followed them to the mouth of the Bois des Sioux, when the guides left

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us with instructions to keep down by the river out of sight and to keep quiet while they went after the buffalo, which evidently were quite numerous. In about an hour we went down the bed of the Red river about a half mile to where the banks were high. Climbing to the top, we saw a herd of fully eighty buffalo basking on the prairie east of the river and the guides crawling through the snow to get up to them. They were in a bend of the Otter Tail and only about eighty rods from the Red river.

Moulton and I at once started up the river on the run wallowing through four foot drifts to stop the teams, which were not more than three quarters of a mile away and in a direct line with the buffalo. I led the teams down out of sight toward a point of timber opposite where the city of Wahpeton now stands. Here we prepared to camp with as little noise as possible.

The guides crawled through the snow which was about eighteen inches deep, breaking the crust from underneath. The animals had their heads down below the surface of the snow, where they had pawed it away to get at the dry grass. The bulls fed outside and the cows and calves in the center, so as to be protected from the wolves which hovered around the herd. When all was quiet the guides would crawl up to the cordon of bulls. As they slowly approached, the bulls would come up, smell their wolf-skin caps and snort a little. The guides would lie perfectly quiet. The bulls, evidently believing the caps were dead wolves, would go on pawing and feeding. As the guides got up near a cow or calf they would fire and drop their guns in the snow and hold their wolf-skin gauntlets over the gun locks to keep them dry. The startled buffalo would jump away a few rods and turn around to see what had made the noise. Seeing nothing moving but themselves, they would paw the snow and go to eating again. In this way they killed a cow and two calves, and wounded two cows that they could not get, owing to the approach of night. They then tied a red handkerchief to a ramrod and stuck the rod in the snow to keep the wolves away, and left the carcasses to freeze.

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On Friday the 30th, Moulton and I tried to survey some of the townsite, but the wind blew so hard that we could not straighten our tape line chain, and we had to abandon the effort. A double team started under the lead of Prentiss and Charlie Bottineau to bring in the dead buffalo. It was a very severe day, and when night came the teams had not returned. We in camp became very uneasy. As it began to grow dark some one shouted "Whoa!" down on the river. Pierre sprang 421 to his feet with the exclamation, "They've come! O, God, I'm so glad!" Soon Prentiss came into camp nearly exhausted and called for hot tea. He emptied cup after cup in quick succession until he got warm. They had been compelled to abandon one of our best oxen about four miles up the Otter Tail, and had lost their way and wandered fully eight miles without finding the dead buffalo. A terrible night of storm followed, which we were long to remember.

Saturday the 31st opened clear and cold. We had been twenty-nine days traveling to the town we were to make at the head of the Red river of the North, and in many ways had gained a memorable experience. But we were after money, and the glamour of the "million in it" brightened all the difficult ways we had come since leaving St. Paul.

### **SURVEYING THIS TOWNSITE AND KILLING ANOTHER BUFFALO.**

The morning of the 31st, Pierre Bottineau started with the teams to see if he could find the dead buffalo, while Moulton and I began to survey the Breckenridge townsite. As we had only a hand compass and an ordinary tape line, and a very crooked stream to meander, it was slow work. All we expected to do, however, was to block out the site and leave the filling in to be done in St. Paul. We were not very particular as to the absolute accuracy of such doings in those days. About four o'clock in the afternoon we had the main lines completed.

We climbed the river bank to return to the camp, when we saw the team halted, that Pierre had taken out in the morning. Hastening up to solve the trouble, we heard the report of two guns in quick succession on the low ground bordering the river. Then a huge buffalo bull,

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weighing probably a ton, lurched into sight through the snow at the base of a sharp rise from a marsh fronting me. I was alone, having got some distance ahead of Moulton. When I saw the bull he was about thirty rods away, coming directly toward me and rounding the inner edge of the deep drifted bluff that evidently he could not break through. On the river side of the marsh the guides ran back and forth to keep him from crossing. As the buffalo passed them they would pump balls into him from their double-barrelled shot 422 guns. Seeing me on the bank, the bull turned and raced back in front of the guides. Four bullets again struck him. He then made three convulsive leaps forward, the last clearing fully fifteen feet. Then his legs sprawled out and he went down and soon was dead.

The team, having on the sled the cow and two calves and part of the ox (evidently he had died shortly after Charlie left him the evening before), went on to camp, headed by Pierre, while Moulton and I helped Charlie dress the buffalo just killed. It was near sundown and too late for the teams to return, so Charlie fixed his red handkerchief in a split stick and stuck it in the snow by the carcass to keep the wolves away, and we walked up the river bank to the camp at the mouth of the Bois des Sioux, which we reached about dusk.

The next day was Sunday, February 1st. We hauled in the buffalo body and spent the rest of the day writing to friends at home, for Moulton and the guides and Billy, their cook, were to return soon to St. Paul. Having now about a ton of buffalo meat on hand, we packed it in ice the best we could, and felt that we were safe from starvation until supplies could reach us in the spring, unless a warm spell should set in early in the spring, a thing that exactly did happen.

Moulton had brought a tough, wiry Indian pony through to the Bois des Sioux, to draw back the necessary supplies for himself and our guides. The guides and Barrett, one of the teamsters, had been rigging a jumper and had it nearly completed ready to load on Monday, the 2nd. Moulton and I had completed the townsite survey, and all was ready except the harness for the pony, to be made of raw buffalo hide. It consisted of a front shoulder piece, and two hide traces all in one strip and held in place by an equally broad

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back band. Meantime two of our men had been felling trees to enclose a yard for our cattle.

### **MOULTON RETURNS TO ST. PAUL.**

February 3rd, Moulton and the two guides and the cook left the Red river camp to return to St. Paul, expecting to reach our Bois des Sioux camp about four miles up the river about dark. From there they were to take the first good chance to cross the twenty-five mile wide prairie to Lightning lake in daylight and before storms would rise again.

Wednesday, February 4th, all went to work at the mouth of the Bois des Sioux cutting logs for our shanty, as we had only a tent for shelter.

### **MEN ON SHORT RATIONS AND CATTLE STARVING.**

We started from St. Paul with only a barrel of flour, and as we gave Moulton part of that, there was but little left. Nothing could be done but to take the remainder of the corn and cob meal away from the cattle and put them on elm tree browse, using the meal for ourselves. It was tough business for both sides, but there was no other way. There was only a little more than a two bushel and a half bagful of it left. This we divided on the second of February in daily portions to last till April 1st, the date we expected Moulton back with supplies for our relief.

The division gave, for each of the six men who remained, enough of this coarse mixture, when wet in water and baked in our old-fashioned tin over before the fire, to supply a cake roughly measuring six inches in length, three inches in width, and a half an inch in thickness, at night and morning. At noon we had buffalo meat chopped up, and a slice of pork cut from about fifty pounds that was left of a 150-pound hog we started with from St. Paul. This was boiled into a soft, thick concoction that Bottineau called "boo-yeh." We also had about a peck of beans left. On such living bowels trouble soon started. I was the

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first victim. We had a case of drug remedies, and by their aid we kept ourselves fairly well patched up during the remainder of the winter.

Soon our cattle began to weaken. Our second ox was found in a few days unable to get on his feet. We shot him, buried his quarters in snow and ice, and hauled the body a few rods away from the stable and left it for the wolves to quarrel over. The stable we fastened tight at night, and we soon became used to the howls and fighting yelps and snarls of these animal devils of the woods and prairies.

On Thursday, the 19th of February, we finished mud-chinking between the logs of the shanty we had built, and moved 424 into it from the tent that for six weeks had been our home. Our bed was made of poplar poles covered with willows and weeds. On this foundation we spread out buffalo skins and waterproofs and the few blankets we had. Our thickly padded bed comforter covered us. We still slept with all our day clothes on. At first we had neither door nor window. We used our tent over these openings to block out the cold the best we could. We had a rip saw, and with that we soon made rough basswood boards for door and window casings, and with cracks battened got along quite comfortably. The roof was made of 20-inch shake shingles, split from sawed-off oak logs.

On Wednesday morning, the 25th, a third ox could not get up and Prentiss shot him. We saved the quarters and hauled the body out to the wolves. That night a strong southeast wind drove snow an inch deep upon our bed clothes. All hands turned out in the morning and calked the cracks of the roof with dry grass that we found under the snow out on the prairie. At the time we built our shanty house the point where the Otter Tail river joins the Red was covered west of the bluff with a thick growth of elm, oak, and basswood trees. We built our house at the north end of this grove, and the stable for our cattle on the fifteen-foot rise a few rods off and nearly fronting the house, which faced the bluff. South of the house, near the point, was where we cut down trees for a cattle fence and where our cattle were herded, except in extreme dry weather and cold nights, and also where we fed them their meals of elm browse.

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On Wednesday, March 4th, we divided what salt we had left, confining us to about a pint a week until April 1st. On the 6th we divided our beans, limiting us to less than a quart a week for the same time. We tried to help out our food supply by shooting prairie chickens and rabbits in the patches of wood along the river, but the weather was so severe and the snow so deep that we were not very successful.

### **A MARCH FLOOD.**

Sunday, March 15th, the weather suddenly turned warm, and the snow began to melt. No effective work could be done by any of us on account of bowel trouble. Tuesday, the 17th, 425 we had to kill another of our cattle, very poor; the only parts worth saving were the hams, heart and tongue. As the buffalo cow had thawed we skinned her and found the flesh spoiled, so we dragged her down on the ice for the wolves to eat. Our meat supply was now nearly gone, only the hams of one ox and half of a buffalo calf remained. On Saturday we divided the last of our corn and cob meal. Some discouragement prevailed as the snow melted and the river rose above its banks during this unseasonably warm spell, and the worst of it was that we feared its effect on the supply teams then on the way to relieve us. That we had reason to fear was fully known later.

On the morning of Friday, April 3rd, the water from the river began to come into the house, the level of the house foundation being only about four feet above the summer stage of water in the river. The only thing to do was to pile our things on the bed and let it come. It rose about eight inches more and then came to a stand.

Our fire place was built under the ridgepole of the house, and was well mudded with clay about eighteen inches above the earth floor. The smoke went through the roof. The fireplace was built of logs and was about four feet square. We had received fair warning of what was to come later on, so we began to build a temporary shed, about twelve feet square, farther back where the ground was some fifteen feet higher. In our feeble condition this was slow work. Though the air had turned cold, the water rose more than a foot higher

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in the house that afternoon. We cut and dragged in elm logs and built up the floor and fire bed so that our feet and fire would be above water. Then we went to bed with our bed poles only about a foot above the flood.

Sunday, the 5th, was clear and intensely cold. Ice had frozen during the night thick enough to bear an ox. There was no chance to rest that day, for the weather might turn warmer on short notice. So we cut and backed logs up the fifteen foot bank through water knee deep, the remainder of our oxen being so weak we could not use them. Six of the oxen had died, and we had eaten all that was eatable of three of them, and God only knew when Moulton could come to our relief.

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Thursday, April 9th, I shot a large otter in the last bend the Otter Tail river makes before uniting with the Bois des Sioux to form the Red river. I skinned the otter, and stuffed the skin; then, in order to promote variety in our cooking, we set Prentiss at work roasting it without parboiling, which we should have done. As our salt was gone, there was no seasoning to temper the intense oily, fishy condition of the meat. We thought it would taste better cold, so we laid it by for breakfast on the 10th, but the taste was so strong that we had to throw it out for the wolves to eat.

Ed Dunn, one of our men, started for St. Paul afoot and alone on the morning of the 10th, with eight day's supply of meat from our cattle that had starved to death. We could not spare him either a gun or an axe. All the weapon we could let him have was a butcher knife, and the only covering a heavy Mackinaw blanket. Months afterwards we heard he had got off the road going toward St. Cloud, and wandered away westward across the prairie that Bottineau was so careful to shun through fear of storms. He reached a settler's house on the Minnesota river at last, with both feet frozen so badly that his toes had to be amputated. He said, before starting, that we were all bound to die anyway, and he preferred to make at least one desperate struggle for his life.



## **APRIL BLIZZARDS.**

Sunday, the 12th of April, our beds were drifted over with fine snow that had sifted through the roof in a blizzard during the night. The storm was even worse than the one which snowed us under at Lightning lake. It brought a hard outlook for Ed Dunn, we thought, unless he could have reached a patch of timber somewhere.

After Dunn left us on the 10th, we poured water into our molasses keg, shook it up, and afterward doled it out carefully until the 14th, when we saw the last of it. Sweets and salt were now gone for good. There was nothing to keep the four of our remaining cattle alive but elm buds, and nothing for us but the quarters of three of our starved cattle, for our buffalo meat was gone. Then the sky promised still another snow storm. It came, and Tuesday the 14th was another terrible 427 day. Where was Moulton and his relief teams? They ought to have been through to us by April 1st. We feared something had happened. As subsequent events proved, something had happened.

Wednesday the 15th was intensely cold for April, with cloudless sky and freezing fast all day. Ice that opened on the river during the thaw, now closed so as to bear loaded teams. Only two places where the water ran rapidly were now open, and they were closing. We felt much regret for loss of our thermometer. Crows for several days had become very tame. We could get within four or five rods of them before they would fly. The cold continued on the 16th and 17th.

## **A TRYING RELIEF EXPERIENCE.**

On the 17th of April Moulton came through to us with three men, and told of a hard time trying to come to our relief. The party bringing supplies started from St. Paul on the 9th of March. The warm wave struck them on the 15th of March. They kept on over the fast melting snow until they reached Lake Pomme de Terre, and then, thoroughly frightened, several of the men threw off their loads and turned back, despite all Moulton could say or

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do. At once Moulton and three of his men loaded their packs with biscuits and started for us, though we were fifty miles distant and the prairies were swimming with water.

They finally came to the swamps at the head of Mustinka river, some fifteen miles from us, and found them deep under water. They waded in snow and slush nearly an hour until, hip deep, and no hope ahead, and night coming on, they had to retreat. Chilled to the bone, they made their way back to a small patch of woods, built a fire, dried their wet clothes as best they could, and went back to Lake Pomme de Terre, put up a shelter shanty, and two weeks later they crossed those swamps to us on the ice. I got half a biscuit from what they had left when they reached us.

The men of those days were here mainly for what they could make, and were willing to take chances to get what they were after. We, of this Red river venture, were built that way. 428 We thought we saw Opportunity at the door, we locked arms with her, but found on this trip that it was not Opportunity at all.

### **TWO OTHER TOWNSITES BELOW BRECKENRIDGE.**

On the morning of April the 19th, Moulton and his men and I started down the river to make more towns, our only dependence for food being our guns and a seven and a half pound can of meat biscuit. This meat biscuit was made of beef boiled soft and the fat poured over it while hot, the whole being powdered when cold. It made a nourishing soup.

Our first stopping place was to be Graham's Point, near where Fort Abercrombie was afterward built, about twelve miles below Breckenridge. Here the first town below Breckenridge was to be started. English Billy, our cook, who was one of Moulton's men, and I, were to hold it, our only dependence for food being our guns and the fish in the river, with no salt.

Prentiss, Barrett teamster Bill, and Bob, were to remain in Breckenridge to hold that site. Mark Leadbeater and John Hunt were to go downstream with Moulton to start a third town

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at the mouth of the Sheyenne river, where we hoped the Northern Pacific railroad would cross the Red river into Dakota.

As there were no more provisions at Breckenridge, the last ox of our faithful ten had to be killed on the morning of the 20th, about the time we were eating our meal of meat biscuit soup at Graham's Point. After that meal I was to go out on the prairie to see if I could find game. Moulton and his two men went on down the river with their guns and what was left of the meat biscuit, and he promised to keep out of sight on the river ice while I hunted for something for Billy and me to eat.

Walking up the bank from the lower level where we had put up our tent, I saw what looked like four buffaloes feeding on bare spots of the prairie about three miles away and something like a mile from the river. I began to stalk them, as we say in hunting parlance. Soon they swung around and fed on the bare places toward the head of what used to be called Whiskey creek. I followed them as carefully as I could until 429 I came within about a mile of them, when they moved to a lower level out of sight. I then started on a trot and had come considerably nearer to where they went out of sight, when they slowly went up the bank where the drifted snow was lightest, and disappeared. I took their trail up to the foot of a rise which was about fifteen feet high. All was silent as a graveyard. I began to climb, half expecting to sight the buffaloes a mile away. As I poked my black sheep-skin cap above the rise I saw four bulls, weighing I should say a ton each, standing in a huddle and evidently considering in their animal minds what to do next. Instantly four buffalo tails flashed into the air and away all went across the country toward Breckenridge. It was useless to shoot and perhaps scare some other game, so, shouldering my gun, I walked down toward the bed of the creek out of sight, as the snow had begun to fly and I had no intention of losing my way, for I knew that the creek at flood time emptied into the Red river about a mile to the westward.

### **MY SECOND BUFFALO AND HOW WE GOT HIM.**

As I walked along, looking for small game, I saw just ahead of me a buffalo lying on a point of land where blown away. I tried to edge around out of sight till I could get a fair shot, when I heard a cap crack, then another, and another, in quick succession. The buffalo rose to his feet without seeming to be in any hurry, and moved off on the prairie and out of sight. I hurried down around the point. There stood John Hunt, back towards me, and holding his gun by the muzzle end of the barrel with breech upraised above his head as if about to smash it down on the trunk of a tree just in front of him. "I'll break it! Damned it I don't break it," he muttered. "Better think for times, before you do that, John; extra guns are not every plentiful out here," I said. "Where did you come from," he blurted, as he plumped the butt of his gun down into the snow at his feet. "No matter, now, you've got your priming wet. Reload, and we'll get that buffalo yet," I said. "Get that buffalo," John replied, disdainfully; "He's half way to Pembina by this time." "Don't waste time talking," I said; "snow out there on the prairie is knee 430 deep, and that buffalo poor, and not frightened. He'll be coming back to the shelter of this coulee in a few minutes if let alone. Reprime your gun and we'll crawl up the bank and see about it."

John did as I directed. As we got to the top of the bank, we saw the buffalo standing about fifteen rods away, looking northward and evidently considering what he had better do next. Then, as I expected, he turned around and came back toward the bare grassy spot he had just left on the slope of the bluff. We were lying in a place where the bull could not see us. He came a few steps directly toward us and then turned sidewise, as if making for a bare spot a little farther eastward on the bank of the creek. I said to John, "When he stops will be our chance. We will aim at his heart. I will count one, two, three, and when I say three, let both guns crack." The buffalo waded slowly two or three rods through the snow and stopped. I counted three. Both guns sounded as one. The buffalo made a tremendous bound, followed by two more, and then, all sprawled out, he went down, and before we got to him he was dead. I could put three of my fingers into the hole our balls made through his heart.

Snow was falling, fresh meat tempting. Moulton and Mark came up and raised a tent. Meantime the buffalo was cut open, the liver taken out, and we were roasting strips of it on the end of sharpened sticks in the fire. There may have been sweeter meals for me. If so, I could not remember them. Having skinned the buffalo and dried the skin stretched on stakes back of the fire, we spliced it with my oilcloth blanket, and this increased our overhead shelter from the snow. The storm soon ceased and it turned colder. We continued to cut thin strips of all that was eatable of the buffalo, and jerked it by drying on poles before the fire. Billy, my cook, and I, then went into permanent camp in the woods opposite Graham's Point, while Moulton, having been crippled by tipping over a cup of hot tea upon one of his feet, had to wait over until the river cleared of ice so that he could go down by canoe.

### **MILLIONS IN IT.**

Tuesday, the 21st of April, Theodore H. Barrett of St. Cloud, a surveyor whom Moulton brought to plat our Breckenridge 431 and Graham's Point townsites, arrived at the point, and meandered the town that was to be. On the 22nd he finished his Graham's Point plat, and on the 23rd went to Breckenridge and completed that survey in the rough, nearly as Moulton and I had already meandered it. Most of the day, in correcting this work ready for the plat, we had to wade through prairie ponds, and some of them nearly knee deep. But what of that? There were still millions in it.

About noon I saw five buffalo cows and four calves on the bank of the Bois des Sioux river just above its mouth, where part of Wahpeton now stands. I wounded three of the cows, but they got away so far toward the Wild Rice river, to the westward, that I thought it would not pay to follow them.

Friday, the 24th, we surveyed two claims bordering the townsite of Breckenridge. It rained all night. The river rose so fast that we had to move our things and camp in the shanty on

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top of the bluff to the southward. On the 25th we also had to move our Graham's Point camp to higher ground.

Sunday, the 26th, we spent in camp at Graham's Point. Monday, the 27th, Billy and I began on our cabin. Again we had to move camp on account of the rising water, moving twice, and one of our removals was in the night. On the 28th, the next day, we continued the cutting and carrying of logs for the cabin. Barrett, the surveyor, helped us with the heaviest logs. We could not roll some of them up more than half way on the skids without sitting down to rest, being so weak; but this was no wonder, as we had nothing to eat but stewed buffalo meat and tea and boiled cat fish without salt.

John and Mark started on the 28th to fix a crossing of the Otter Tail river, as we intended to send John and Barrett to St. Cloud to hurry supplies and breaking teams. We also planned to have some ox meat brought down to the point on a raft from Breckenridge. The current of the high water was so swift, however, that a raft could not safely come. So Prentiss and John Hunt came down on foot. At Breckenridge the men had killed a buffalo the week before. The water on the 30th was about eighteen feet above low water mark.

On May 1st the river was falling rapidly. Barrett, John 432 and Prentiss started from Breckenridge for St. Cloud the morning of the second. Barrett was to stop at Lake Pomme de Terre and bring back Harris to superintend at Breckenridge, bringing along some temporary food supplies to help out the buffalo meat. Sunday, May 3rd, Moulton came down to Graham's Point from Breckenridge in a canoe with an Indian and went down to the mouth of the Sheyenne river to make another town there. The Indian said he passed men with boats some distance up the Otter Tail, who were coming down the river.

Monday, May 4th, Joe Whitford, who was afterward killed by the Indians in 1862, came with a Frenchman and an ox and cart, expecting to appropriate the townsite we were on; but, finding it occupied, he went across the river and camped where Graham formerly had his camp, from which this point received his name. All of Dakota was Indian territory, and

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he was liable to be driven off at any time. Whitford was sent by a Little Falls company and was a welcome arrival to us, for we had been living on tea and boiled catfish without salt for several days. They had flour. It was the first I had tasted since January, and like a fool I filled my stomach with pancakes and syrup. After supper I went down in the woods and rolled in agony behind a log until vomiting relieved me.

Friday, the 8th, teams and supplies came to Breckenridge. Saturday, the 9th, I went down with Bill Simpson toward Whiskey creek to pick out a claim for him. Mark went down to the Sheyenne about noon. Harris and Barrett remained at the Point. Sunday, the 10th, we rested in camp. Monday, the 11th, supplies came down to the Point from Breckenridge, a welcome arrival. May 12th I went up to Breckenridge to see to things there, both Prentiss and Moulton being gone.

Wednesday, the 13th, McDonald and his men came down the Otter Tail in boats. They were seven days coming from Otter Tail lake. They started by way of Crow Wing before we started from St. Paul, and got frozen into Otter Tail lake and had to winter there. Tom Patmore and Bob went down to the Point ahead of them, to look after our claims. They returned on Friday, the 15th, and reported that two of Becker and Hollinshead's men, who had located about six miles south 433 of the mouth of the Wild Rice river, had been up begging provisions to keep them from starving.

Saturday, the 16th, Harris and Barrett, one of our teamsters, started from the Point to Sheyenne. George and Sweetser followed about noon to help hold that site against McDonald's men, if they acted ugly. A few days later Moulton returned with the men who had wintered at Sheyenne, and hurried them, half starved, through to St. Cloud to receive pay for vacating the townsite. It was a waste of money. That Sheyenne townsite is now a farm, and we never entered a foot of it.

In those days the Red river of the North was to be the coming steamboat avenue of travel between the United States and Manitoba, besides being the main outlet of a rich farming

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region. This came true for a few years between Fargo and the border. Above Fargo the river was at all seasons, except flood time, not much better than a good sized creek, and so crooked that its chief ambition seemed to be to tie itself into all kinds of bow knots. From May 17th until I started to St. Paul in the latter part of June, I was chiefly engaged in directing garden and farming operations.

### **AFTERWARD.**

In August, 1857, I went back to editing the St. Anthony Express. The financial panic of that year having begun, I took no further interest in Red river townsites. The indomitable Brott, however, persevered. He started a building at Breckenridge to be a steam saw mill of 150 horse power, and had mill machinery strung along all the way from St. Paul to the Red river, when he did not know that a single saw log, so large as sixteen feet long and a foot through, could be floated down the crooked shallow Otter Tail river, even in a June freshet, without snagging.

When the Civil War began, Brott's men enlisted. Barrett, the surveyor of our townsites, became the colonel of a colored regiment, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, returned to Minnesota and for many years owned a large farm in Grant and Stevens counties, where he died about a dozen years ago.

In 1862 the Indian war began. Whitford was killed by the 28 434 Indians, and the Breckenridge mill building was burned. Of course, all we had done up there fell into ruins.

Brott went east before the end of the Civil War, loaded a steamer with supplies for the South, steamed around to New Orleans, and there patched up his shattered fortunes. He died about ten years ago in the city of Washington. Endowed with tireless energy, no amount of unfortunate circumstances seemed to discourage him. Continually under the harrow of debt, its teeth, however, sharp, seemed only to wound him slightly before he was up and getting ready to go under again.



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The Graham's Point and Sheyenne enterprises were abandoned. At Breckenridge I selected two hundred lots as my share, and they were deeded to me by Henry T. Welles, who had become the proprietor of the town. The railroad built the town so far away from them, however, that they became worthless even for tax purposes. What has become of them I have not heard, and I have not seen a foot of that country since June, 1857. The medicine I took during six months of that year cured me of the townsite speculation fever so completely that I have never felt a touch of it since.